Coffee Doesn't Cure Acedia

The many changes over the past seven months (and more) with this site and my work has a rather simple explanation. After about 7 years of freelancing, I got a regular job.

The biggest adjustment for my family has been the time; a commute, 8 hours of work or more, lunch time that doesn't count – almost half the week is now spent away from home.

I now spend most of my waking hours in the "normal" world of an American office. A small but growing company, and having worked for smaller and larger companies in the past there is a lot that stays the same regardless of industry, decade, and state in which the office exists.

There's the usual temptation to vice that goes along with working in the modern office environment. As I am currently reading a lot of old texts on the virtues and vices for a new project, the reading and research and daily grind have made the overlap stand out. There's envy, of course, whenever you have gatherings of people, greed whenever money and goods are involved, wrath as tempers flare and patience wanes, pride abounds and there is even lust – though fortunately it presents itself in its older form, luxury, for most of us.

But if I had to pick one vice most plagued the modern workplace, I would not hesitate to name acedia. A word considered so archaic spell check doesn't recognize it. Over generations the vice became referred to as sloth, and equated with laziness. As with all evil, it has worked best when it keeps us unaware of itself.

The Office Vice

Take this scenario:

> For Bob, time at the office begins to slow down as lunch approaches. It feels as though it completely stops after lunch. It is as if the clock does not move at all, and a day feels like a week. He doesn't feel like he's making much headway on the tasks and goals at hand, and he's got tabs open on his browser for news, weather, ebay or craigslist. He leans back in is chair and glances at his fellow works, to see if he might happen to make eye contact and they can discuss some matter – work related or not. He remembers that Lucy, in sales, had a daughter that was sick with something last week, maybe he should go and ask her how the kid is doing. It would be the nice thing to do, right? Maybe John in receiving could use a hand.
>
> His mind wanders to a reminder from LinkedIn that a fraternity brother has gotten a new title at his job. What if they had stayed on the West Coast? He'd probably be making more money. Definitely be a lot happier. Heck, Bob's downright certain he would be making more of a difference in the world. After all, that is what he's supposed to be doing with his life, isn't it?

You wouldn't exactly call Bob lazy, and the scenario is probably all too familiar.

Now compare it with a description of Acedia – a vice considered the most dangerous by the desert monks of the 5th century:

> The demon of acedia – also called the noonday demon (Psalm 91:6) – is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour (10 am) and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. (2 pm)
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> First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour (3 pm), to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. Should there be someone at this period who happens to offend him in some way or other, this too the demon uses to contribute further to his hatred.
>
> This demon drives him along to desire other sites where he can more easily procure life's necessities, more readily find work and make a real success of himself. He goes on to suggest that, after all, it is not the place that is the basis of pleasing the Lord. God is to be adored everywhere. He joins to these reflections the memory of his dear ones and of his former way of life. He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight.

Rings pretty true, even though the monk Evagrius wrote it some 1600 years ago. Evagrius was so concerned about the vice that he described it is a demon that "rips the soul apart as a dog would kill a fawn"

Acedia practically defines the workplace attitude. Whether the afternoon lull is referred to as a 'lazy day' or being 'food-stupid' or remarks are made about how everyone is just 'out of it.' The mood has a name, though it has almost been forgotten.

How do more and more people cope with it? Caffeine. Energy Drinks. 5-Hour Energy fought its way into the market with the slogan that it beat "the two-o'clock feeling." Imagine how ridiculous it would be to develop a tonic to beat any other particular vice! I'm sure it will happen, and has happened. But for the moment it is happening, and no one quite realizes it because the name and definition of the vice has shifted over time.

Evagrius describes ascedia as "an ethereal friendship, one who leads our steps astray, hatred of industriousness, a battle against stillness … laziness in prayer… untimely drowsiness, revolving sleep… an opponent of perseverance … a partaker in sorrow, a clock for hunger." Even he who defined it (and the other chief vices for the first time) had a hard time defining it. *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* defined it more succinctly as "a state of restlessness and inability either to work or to pray." Restlessness is a key trait of acedia, and yet not something we associate with being lazy. Being a busybody, gossip, or just doing busywork may appear to be industrious, doing something, and "not lazy," but all are actually acedia.

If you think about it, our culture's obsession with current events, celebrity stalking, and the 24-hour news day all are symptoms of acedia also. It's not slothful to stay informed, but it isn't industrious.

So in a nutshell, checking Facebook one more time, taking a stroll about the office, and getting another cup of coffee are not going to break "the two-o'clock feeling."

The Cure for Acedia

What actually is the cure for acedia? First of all, being aware of it. Acedia has managed to be so entrenched because it is seen as acceptable, even unavoidable. The idea of naming a power to conquer it has some truth here: name the noonday demon, pray for the strength to overcome, and consciously fight it, and it will have little power over you.

Evagrius writes in the *Eight Thoughts* that perseverance, "the execution of all tasks with great attention" and the fear of God are the cure for acedia. "Set a measure for yourself in every work and do not let up until you have completed it. Pray with understanding and intensity, and the spirit of acedia will flee from you. "

You can also keep in mind the following words from the *Hagakure*, the Book of the Samurai (and quoted in *The Way of the Christian Samurai*):

> "There is surely nothing other than the single purpose of the present moment. A man's whole life is a succession of moment after moment. There will be nothing else to do, and nothing else to pursue. Live being true to the single purpose of the moment."

Attentiveness, awareness, prayer, and perseverance – and charity. Test every moment, every act, against the test of charity. Is what I am doing loving God and my neighbor? Or am I distracting myself and my neighbor?

Further reading on the Internet:

- Accidie by Aldous Huxley
- Sloth – Catholic Encyclopedia
- Acedia – Wikipedia
- St. Cassian and Evagrius on Acedia

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